



Title	Review of G.E.R. Lloyd, In the Grip of Disease: Studies in the Greek Imagination
Authors(s)	Crowley, Timothy J.
Publication date	2004-12
Publication information	Crowley, Timothy J. "Review of G.E.R. Lloyd, In the Grip of Disease: Studies in the Greek Imagination." Taylor & Francis (Routledge), December 2004. https://doi.org/10.1080/0967255042000278094 .
Publisher	Taylor & Francis (Routledge)
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/12914
Publisher's version (DOI)	10.1080/0967255042000278094

Downloaded 2026-05-01 23:34:44

The UCD community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters! (@ucd_oa)



© Some rights reserved. For more information

In the Grip of Disease: Studies in the Greek Imagination

By G.E.R. Lloyd

Oxford University Press, 2003. ISBN 0-19-925323-4. Pp. xxi + 257.

This book is an ambitious attempt to chart the impact of ideas about disease, its provenance and treatment, upon all facets of the Greek imagination, from the Archaic to the Graeco-Roman period. The scope is truly impressive: Lloyd moves nimbly between literature and historiography to philosophy, religion, and politics, as well as medical theory itself. Alongside the expected discussions of the Hippocratic writings (Chapter 3) and Galen (Chapter 8), Lloyd discusses passages from, among others, Homer, Hesiod and Empedocles (Chapter 2); Sophocles and Euripides (Chapter 4); Herodotus and Thucydides (Chapter 5); and Plato, Aristotle and Lucretius (Chapters 6, 7, and 8 respectively). Lloyd believes that his synoptic approach will afford insights that are not available from studies more narrowly focused upon individual authors or individual genres.

In the introductory first chapter Lloyd argues that the repercussions of ideas about disease and health on the values of ancient Greek society are more pervasive and profound than is generally thought to be the case. The notion of disease infects Greek thought about such major themes as causation and responsibility, selfhood and the mind-body relation, purification and pollution, authority and expertise, reality and appearance, and good and evil (pp. 1, 5-8). In each of the succeeding chapters Lloyd identifies passages from different genres and different periods, and marshals from these the evidence of the Greek preoccupation with disease.

Chapter 2 begins naturally enough with the account at the beginning of the *Iliad* of the plague that afflicts the Achaeans, thereby introducing the theme of the divine origin of disease; also introduced in this chapter is the problematic figure of the authority or specialist in the diagnosis and treatment of disease. Both of these themes come to the fore in Chapter 3. Here Lloyd discusses the complex relationship between the two traditions of thought about disease and healing: the religious or sacred tradition and the 'secular' tradition. According to the first tradition, the gods are responsible both for bringing disease or plague upon certain individuals or peoples as punishment, and for curing these afflictions. Prophets, seers and priests claim authority and expertise in determining the cause of the gods' displeasure, and in prescribing the actions that would likely win back the gods' favour, e.g., prayer, sacrifice, and ritual purification. This understanding of disease is already evident in Homer and Hesiod, but in the form of the cult of Asclepius and 'temple medicine', it becomes institutionalized from the 5th century BC onwards, often claiming the support of the richest and most literate members of society, e.g. Sophocles. The second tradition is the naturalistic approach to the identification and treatment of disease, which is first exemplified in the Hippocratic Corpus, and is also evident in Thucydides, and, of course, in Plato, Aristotle and Galen. In this case too there are certain individuals who claim authority and expertise in the diagnosis and treatment of disease, but they take the causes to be physical, which is to say that they appeal to nature rather than to the gods.

Chapter 4 deals with representations in the great tragedies, such as *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Prometheus Vinctus* and the *Bacchae*, of disease as an evil, or a pollution of society, and of healing as involving purification. What comes through from Lloyd's analysis of these plays is human vulnerability in the face of disease; a theme that recurs again in Chapter 5, 'The Historians'. In the case of Thucydides, this helplessness is in the face of the Great plague that struck Athens in the 5th century, of which Thucydides himself was a survivor. While Thucydides is critical of the failure of the doctors to deal with the plague, he envisages his dispassionate analysis of the disease as a record that

may be of use in identifying similar pestilence in future years, much as the Hippocratic authors recorded both their successes and their failures.

Chapters 6 and 7 will perhaps be the most attractive chapters to philosophers, as they deal with Plato and Aristotle respectively. Lloyd identifies four areas of Plato's thought relevant to the understanding of the influence of the problem of disease on his work: his psychology, his theory of justice, his views on authority and expert knowledge in moral and political, as well as other, areas; and finally the extended discussion of the diseases of soul and body in the *Timaeus*. Roughly a third of the chapter deals with the *Timaeus*; but Lloyd also discusses the *Gorgias*, where disease is identified with poverty and injustice as one of the evils that affects body and soul; and the *Republic*, the *Sophist*, the *Laws*, and the *Phaedrus*. The discussion of the ramifications of the notion of disease in Aristotle's work is similarly arranged under four headings: the importance of medicine in natural philosophy; Aristotle's development of the image already found in Plato of the healthy body or organism as a model for the healthy state; his similar use of the medical analogue for the analysis of good and bad political institutions; and, finally, the notion of katharsis as the aim and function of tragedy. The texts in Aristotle that Lloyd discusses are mainly from the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*; despite the discussion of katharsis, the *Poetics* is not treated at length.

Lloyd's main interest in both chapters is the use by Plato and Aristotle of medical analogies in ethics and politics. Both Plato and Aristotle draw on the analogy between the doctor, with his expertise in matters of health, and the moral authority, with his expertise in ethical and political matters. Lloyd distinguishes Aristotle's and Plato's use of the analogy in this way: Plato's authority is the philosopher-king, who is the true statesman because he has perceived the Forms; likewise the doctor knows diseases and can prescribe remedies. Thus Plato draws on the objectivity of the causes of disease to insist that there is also an objectivity about good and evil, right and wrong. For Aristotle, while still relying on the medical analogy, the objectivity of ethics is justified in another way. The doctor for Aristotle, as in Plato, is the figure of authority, but he is the analogue not of an ideal ruler but of the *phronimos*, or the morally sound person, who knows how to act given the full circumstances of a particular case. Aristotle's doctor and the *phronimos* will know the general principles of medicine and ethics respectively, and also how to apply these principles practically.

In Chapter 8 Lloyd poses the question whether or not there were significant changes or developments in the attitudes to, and the understanding of, disease in the Graeco-Roman era. Lloyd answers with a qualified yes to the question, emphasising in particular the contributions of Galen, and also of the psychology of the Stoics. In the Epilogue, following a brief survey of the negative impact on medicine of the development of Christianity, and of the reasons why Galen became the undisputed authority on medicine until the Renaissance, Lloyd considers the changes in the conception of disease in the modern era of biomedicine. Lloyd's final thoughts concern the continuing relevance of ancient ideas on disease to questions concerning Madness, Criminality, and the Creative Imagination.

As to be expected from anything issuing from the pen of G.E.R. Lloyd, *In the Grip of Disease* is full of stimulating ideas and suggestions, all couched in a lively and very readable style that wears its learning lightly. Ultimately, however, I feel that the book promises rather more than it achieves. It is set up as a book that will be of interest to anthropologists, classicists and philosophers; I fear that at least two of these groups will be left less than fully satisfied. Philosophers, for instance, will find most of the material discussed in the chapters on Plato and Aristotle to be quite familiar. On the other hand, classicists will find little that is novel in the chapters on literature and history.

The most interesting theme of the book concerns the relationship between secular and sacred medicine: this issue is the focus of Chapter 3, but it is a theme that recurs in the other chapters as well. Lloyd insists that we do not conceive the history of Greek medicine as the story of how the naturalistic scientific approach gradually usurped the religious approach: such was the interpretation of an older generation, based on a ‘positivist’ linear view of the progress of Greek thought from myth and superstition to reason and nature. The true story, Lloyd insists, is more complex. On Lloyd’s presentation of the matter, temple healing and rational medicine form a dichotomy in the approach towards disease and health that defines much of Greek thought from the 5th century BC to the rise of Christianity.

It must be said, however, that the ‘positivist’ view which Lloyd criticises is already quite out-dated; and, furthermore, that the relationship between the Hippocratics and the temple healers is probably rather more complex than Lloyd himself appreciates. Lloyd presents rational and temple medicine as competing approaches to the treatment of disease: they are ‘radically opposed paradigms’ (51; cf. 60-1) and their concurrent development in the late 5th century and coexistence until the 3rd century AD is a ‘puzzle’. But the presumption that temple medicine and rational medicine are the sorts of movements that would have been perceived as being in competition with one other is one that perhaps ought to be reassessed. In the Hippocratic writings, the main targets of disapprobation tend to be the itinerant doctors, the quacks and diviners, rather than the priests of the temples. As Lloyd acknowledges, no Hippocratic treatise targets the cult of Asclepius or the practices of temple medicine directly (52). But this means that the framework of competition and rivalry does not seem to be adequate for the understanding of this relationship. It may be the case, for instance, that the Hippocratic defences of the medical art and the criticisms of those who practise without knowledge of the art are motivated not by competition with temple healing, but by the emergence of a critical, well-informed public with their own ideas about disease and medicine.

Despite these qualms, *In the Grip of Disease* would function very well as an introductory sourcebook for neophyte research into the cultural history of medicine in antiquity, or, perhaps, as a workbook for seminar study in this area. This is not least because Lloyd adopts the laudable approach of appending to each chapter extracts of the texts that are discussed in that chapter, with facing translations (including new translations by Lloyd himself). It is very helpful to have these texts collected together in this way, and one might even be tempted to express the hope that, where it is feasible, this method be adopted by other authors on topics in ancient philosophy—and, indeed, on topics in the history of philosophy in general. It does also mean, however, that the chapters consist of rather shorter essays than one might have expected from perusing the contents page; over 100 of the 246 pages consist of texts and translations.

I found the following minor typographical and grammatical corrections to be necessary: p. 25, line 22, add space (‘pharmaka,but’); p. 31 line 24, reduce space before ‘the Danaans’; p. 52 line 28, repetition of ‘have’ (‘to have have’); p. 86 line 20, colon or comma after ‘Answer’; p. 88 line 1, comma after ‘Jocasta’; p. 182 line 33, ‘Then’ should be ‘The’; p.203 line 19, ‘exit, from the’ should be ‘exit from, the’. Finally, at one point Lloyd confusingly refers to ‘the story of the imaginary plague’ (236) at the beginning of the *Iliad*. Presumably this is a slip—Homer may be recounting a fictional story, but the *Iliad* does not begin with a story about an imaginary plague.

Timothy J. Crowley,
University College, Oxford
[1,953 words]